



## **Professionalism in Natural Resource Management Agencies**

A Position Statement of the Society of American Foresters

Originally adopted by the SAF Council on October 29, 1996, subsequently revised and extended by the Council on December 16, 1996, and December 7, 2003 This position will expire on December 7, 2008 unless, after subsequent review, the SAF Council decides otherwise.

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### **Position**

The Society of American Foresters believes that sustainable stewardship of our National Forests, state forests, and other public forest lands is most likely to be accomplished when both senior leaders and field-level managers of the federal and state natural resource agencies have had a professional education in the broad field of forestry. While top-level public agency leaders may be political appointees or elected officials, they depend on the advice, knowledge, and experience of career professional forest managers and scientists to implement forest resource policies established by the Executive branch and Congress or by state and local governments. SAF believes that those who manage the nation's 336 million acres of National Forest and other public forest lands must be professionally qualified through both education and experience to fulfill their responsibilities. Sustainable management of the nation's public forest resources for the benefit of both current and future generations requires dedicated career professionals who have been prepared for their responsibilities through education in the broad field of forestry.

SAF recognizes that many federal, state, and local government forest management functions and services are performed by independent contractors, consultants, or other suppliers. Decisions on when, where, and to what extent such contract services are utilized should remain a responsibility of, and be performed under the direction of, the career professional foresters who are responsible for the stewardship of the nation's public forest lands. Where contract services include professional or technical forest management functions, SAF believes that it is essential that they be provided by foresters or other natural resource professionals who adhere to the same high standards of professional ethics and practice expected of public agency resource managers and scientists.

## **Issue**

Key leadership positions as well as most field resource management positions in the Forest Service and other federal and state natural resource agencies have traditionally been filled by career professionals educated in the broad field of forestry, with primary emphasis placed on the competencies and experience needed in these positions. Further, professional foresters in federal and state natural resource agencies are expected to integrate their knowledge and judgment with that of other natural resource specialists including range, wildlife, and fisheries managers and scientists to improve both planning and decision making in management of the nation's public forests. Changes in federal civil service law and federal agency hiring and promotion practices since 1978 have now made it less likely that career positions in the Forest Service and other federal natural resource management agencies will be filled by professional foresters.

This situation is a cause for concern for the Society of American Foresters. It has arisen due to the numbers of federal agency forestry professionals approaching retirement age, hiring and promotion policies intended to increase the types of disciplines involved in resource management decisions, and increased pressure to contract out or "outsource" some forest management functions that have traditionally been performed by career employees. The SAF's concern is not intended to preclude contracting of selected resource management functions but to emphasize that much of the management and field work of the natural resource agencies requires the expertise of professional foresters, whether or not these functions are performed by public agency employees or by independent contractors or other suppliers.

If federal or state natural resource agencies place less emphasis on employment of qualified professionals, forest resource management decisions will increasingly be made by persons who lack the educational background, expertise, and experience needed to manage the nation's National Forests or other public forests in a sustainable manner to provide the expected benefits and meet the needs of the nation's growing population.

## **Background**

The USDA Forest Service and the USDI Bureau of Land Management were established to manage and protect the extensive forest, range, wildlife, and watershed resources of the nation's National Forests and other public lands. Traditionally, most career employees of these agencies were expected to have a professional education in forestry or in related natural resource disciplines, such as range management or wildlife and fisheries management. In many cases over past decades, foresters have advanced to the top leadership positions in these federal agencies, with the trust and confidence of the Executive Branch, the Congress, and the public. At other times, foresters have served capably under both politically appointed and elected agency leaders, maintaining continuity and professionalism in managing the nation's public forests while implementing resource management policies established by the Executive Branch and Congress or by state and local governments.

The federal Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, which created the Senior Executive Service (SES), changed the structure and hiring practices for high-level personnel in the Executive branch, preparing and enabling SES-level managers to fill upper management, supervisory, or policy positions in more than one federal agency. Career-reserved SES positions can only be filled by career appointees and may be assigned from within or outside a given federal agency. General SES positions can be filled by career, noncareer or limited appointment (political appointment) personnel. In either case, the potential has increased that senior positions in the federal natural resource agencies may be filled by persons who lack professional education in forestry or other natural resource management disciplines.

Reduced emphasis on professional qualifications has also occurred with entry-level hiring practices, where civil service requirements make no clear distinction between graduates of SAF-accredited and non-accredited forestry education programs. As a result, career positions in the Forest Service and other federal agencies may be filled by persons who lack complete professional preparation in the broad field of forestry.

Currently, budget constraints and Executive branch direction have also resulted in increased pressure on federal forest managers to contract out or “outsource” some functions that have traditionally been performed by federal agency employees. SAF recognizes that there may be cost savings and other efficiencies to be gained through increased use of contract services. However, where such services include performance of professional or technical forest management functions, it is essential that they be provided by contractors or other suppliers who employ qualified forestry professionals and that they be performed according to the same high standards of professional ethics and practice expected of public agency employees.